

Some After Antics of Boston Corbett, Slayer of Wilkes Booth

By T. A. McNEAL

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SOME time before the Civil War there migrated from England to America a short, stocky youth who was destined to play a part in one of the world's great tragedies. John Corbett was a descendant of the "Roundheads" as the men were called who made up the army of Cromwell, one of the most remarkable bodies of fighting men that ever followed a leader to battle.

Filled with a religious fanaticism which dispelled fear, they went to conflict chanting the psalms of David as their battle songs; and, welcoming death as a passport to paradise, they dashed themselves upon and broke to pieces the bravest and best drilled battalions of Europe. They fought without excitement, boasting or jubilation, but with a firm confidence that the God of battles marched with them and made them invincible by the power of His might. Fanaticism is a full brother of madness and in the blood of many of these followers of Cromwell there was the taint of insanity.

The young "Roundhead" attended a religious revival in the city of Boston shortly after landing in America and became a convert imbued with all the religious fervor of his forbears. In honor of the locality where he felt he had received salvation he changed his name from John to Boston and from that time on was known as Boston Corbett.

THE world has lost sight of the man who finally shot President Lincoln's slayer. He went West and had an odd career. This is related by a writer who knew him and saw much of his life.

When the War of the Rebellion broke out he enlisted in a Massachusetts regiment and throughout his service showed the stoical intrepidity, the indifference to danger and death which had characterized his ancestors, who, chanting their psalms and calling on the name of the Lord of Hosts, carried consternation and defeat to the armies of France.

On one occasion Boston Corbett was sent out with a scouting party, which was surrounded by Mosby's guerrillas. All of the scouts surrendered except Corbett, who took refuge in a dry well and stood off Mosby's command until his ammunition was exhausted. When he ceased firing the rebels, supposing that he was either killed or desperately wounded, peeped over the rim of the well and discovered him sitting calmly at the bottom, munching hard-tack as unconcerned as if there were no war. When captured he was sent to Andersonville, where he spent ten months in that prison.

On most of the soldiers during war, religion sat lightly, but with the fanatical descendant of the "Roundhead," war only deepened his fanaticism and religious fervor. He was a regular attendant and participant in the prayer meetings held by some of the men in his regiment and it was the voice of Sergeant Corbett which sounded the most fervent petitions to the Throne of Grace.

When the immortal Lincoln was stricken down by the bullet of the half-mad actor, Corbett was

among the soldiers sent in pursuit of the assassin. He regarded himself as an avenger of blood, one selected by the Almighty to rid the world of the murderer of the President.

Speaking of it years afterward, Corbett said: "During the intervals between our different skirmishes, I attended a prayer meeting one night and the leader said, 'Brother Corbett, lead us in prayer.' I prayed, 'O Lord, lay not innocent blood to our charge, but bring the guilty speedily to punishment.' Afterward, when the assassin lay at my feet a wounded man, I saw that my bullet had taken effect an inch back of the ear, and I remembered that Mr. Lincoln was shot in about the same part of the head. I said, 'What a God we have.'"

The shooting of Wilkes Booth by Boston Corbett was contrary to orders and he was court-martialed for disobedience, but no punishment was inflicted.

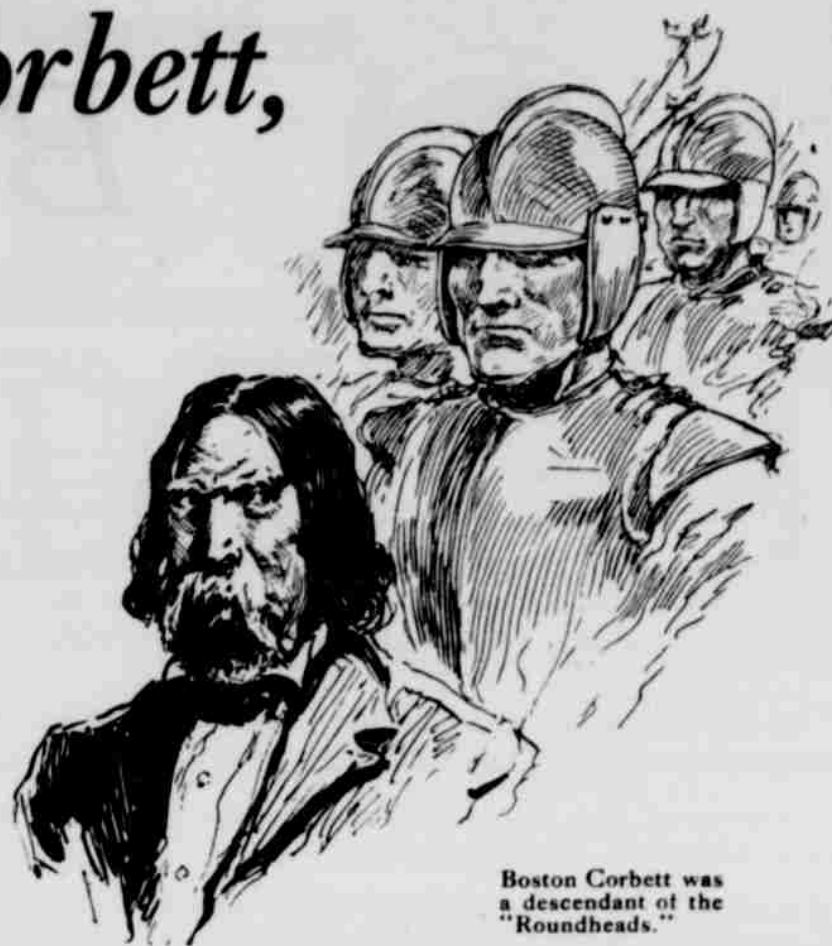
It was some years after the war that Boston Corbett came to Kansas and filed on a homestead in Cloud County. It was a neglected 80 acres he acquired and nature had not really fitted him for a farmer. Here in the solitude of the prairie he began to brood over things. He imagined that the friends of J. Wilkes Booth were plotting against his life. He was possessed of a revolver, and stories are told of his marvelous skill in the use of the weapon. Lying prone on his back he would shoot hawks circling high in the air above him, or riding at full speed on the only animal he possessed, a pony, he would shoot fleeing rabbits, rarely missing a shot.

Dismissed Court in a Hurry

SOME of the young people used to meet near his place on Sundays to play ball. He regarded this as a desecration of the Lord's day and proceeded to break up the game by command, as he asserted, of Jehovah. Complaint was made by the players and Boston was arrested. The trial was to be held in the office of a local justice of the peace. Corbett came in on the day appointed, watched the proceedings with gloomy countenance for a time and then drawing his revolver, commanded that the sons of Belial, constituting the court and jury, should disperse. They did—and that right speedily. The J. P., a large and fleshy man, hid behind a stairway while jurymen, witnesses and town loafers vied with each other for the possession of the door and windows, as places of exit. Having scattered the forces of iniquity in the name of the Lord, Corbett mounted his pony and returned undisturbed to his lonesome shanty on the claim.

It was in the year 1887 that the member from Cloud County in an impassioned speech nominated the slayer of J. Wilkes Booth for the position of assistant doorkeeper of the lower house of the state legislature.

Those were the days when ex-soldiers of the Civil War still dominated the politics of Kansas, and Boston Corbett was selected as assistant doorkeeper without opposition—although one member who knew him was heard to remark that the legislature would be in luck if Corbett didn't get a notion in his head that he was called by the Lord to kill off a few lawmakers before the session ended. For several weeks after his election Boston attended to the not very onerous duties of doorkeeper for the west gallery of the house. He was a peculiar if not striking figure. His hair hung down to



Boston Corbett was a descendant of the "Roundheads."

his shoulders and was parted in the middle. He was not averse to answering questions, but his face was never lighted by a smile.

Probably the session would have passed without any striking incident so far as he was concerned, if he had not become interested in the Salvation Army, which was just then especially active. The methods of these religionists appealed to the militant soul of the "Roundhead."

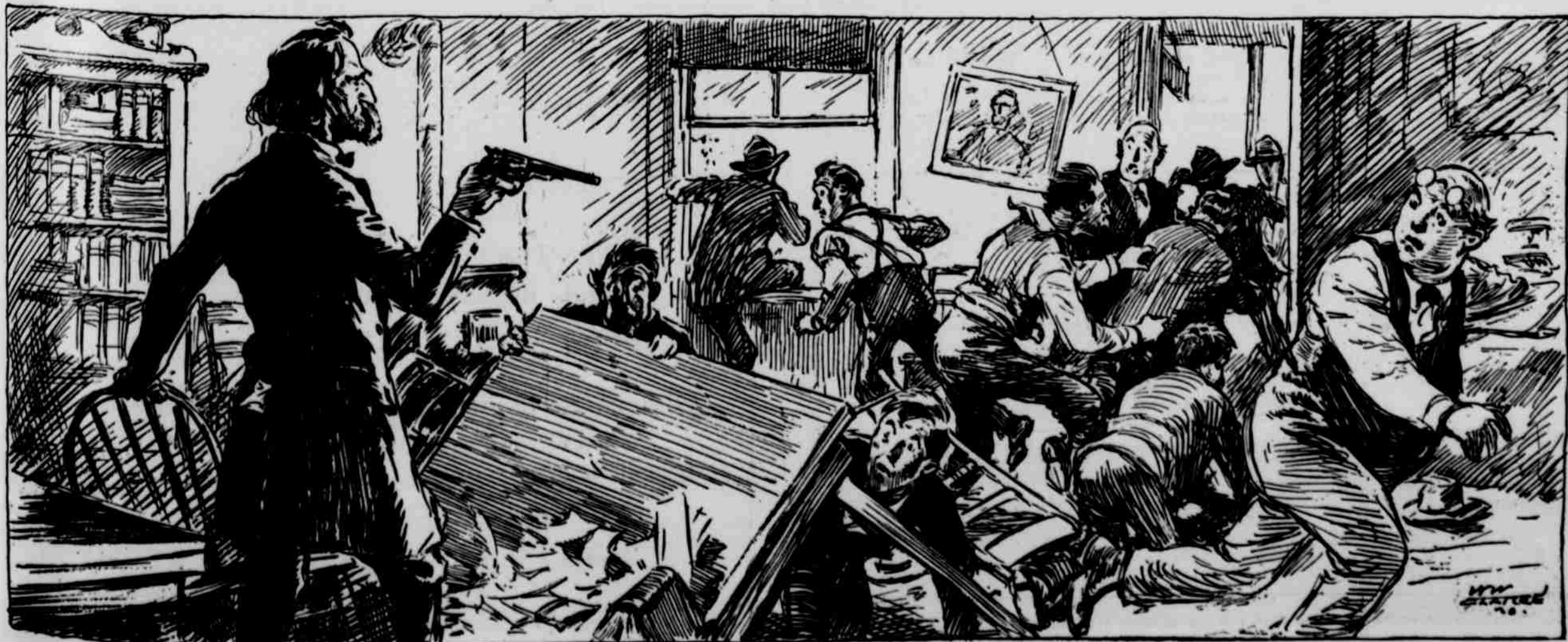
Turned Gun on Legislative Officials

NIGHT after night he marched with the devoted band which, with sound of drum and horn and clashing cymbal, with strident song and vociferous prayer, assailed the battlements of sin and invoked the aid and blessing of the Most High. The religious fervor that stirred the blood and brain of Boston Corbett led him to the conclusion that a number of legislators should be summarily removed from the places they occupied and that the legislative hall should be emptied.

It was a sight calculated to arouse the members from the drowsy dullness that had settled over the routine proceedings, when the little man was seen one morning standing at the front of the gallery in the house, his trusty gun in hand and his eyes blazing with the light of fanatical insanity. The sergeant-at-arms sent up an assistant to urge him to put away his gun, but Corbett made him beat a hasty retreat. The sergeant-at-arms then went up in person and retired with speed if not with grace of movement as he fell down the gallery stair.

Finally a number of police and deputy sheriffs were called in. Boston was overpowered, taken before the probate judge and there adjudged insane. United States Senator Charles Curtis, at that time county attorney, conducted the examination concerning his sanity. A few months afterward the slayer of Booth managed to get away from the hospital guard, mounted a horse he found near the asylum grounds and fled. A few miles from Topeka he left the horse with a note requesting that it be returned to its owner. Almost a third of a century has passed since then and while there have been rumors that he had been seen here and there, no definite word has ever come from Boston Corbett since that spring day when he fled from the asylum.

Probably he has long since died, obsessed to the last no doubt with the fancy that his enemies were pursuing him and seeking revenge for the killing of the slayer of America's greatest President.



He commanded that the "Sons of Belial," the court and jury who were trying him, should disperse.